

Testimony by Father Firas Nasib Aridah
Parish Priest
Roman Catholic Parish of Our Lady Mother of Sorrows
Aboud, West Bank

Hearing on the
Plight of Religious Minorities: Can Religious Pluralism Survive?
before the
Committee on International Relations
of the U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations
June 30, 2006

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony before your committee on the issue of “The Plight of Religious Minorities: Can Religious Pluralism Survive?” This issue affects me, my parishioners and all Christians in the Holy Land. It is our hope that increased awareness of the facts regarding our situation will help affect U.S. policy regarding Israel and Palestine.

I am a Jordanian priest serving the Roman Catholic Parish of Our Lady Mother of Sorrows Church in the village of Aboud in the West Bank since 2003. I oversee all the community and educational activities at the parish, and have worked to strengthen inter-faith alliances among the Christian and Muslim residents of Aboud. We have good relations with the Jewish settlements nearest to us: Beit Ayre and Ofarim. I will summarize my remarks and ask that my full written testimony be entered into the record.

I will limit my testimony to the challenges that the Palestinian Christians of Aboud face to survive and remain in the Holy Land. Many of these present challenges have been created by Israel’s construction of the security barrier. The barrier will confiscate around 1,500 acres of Aboud’s land. As a result, Aboud will be physically separated from surrounding villages and its land. The land is the source of Aboud’s livelihood. Aboud’s agriculturally based economy will be seriously eroded and important grazing land will be lost. The barrier will also impede access to health care and education facilities. Furthermore, the barrier will restrict the land available for the natural growth of Aboud residents, resulting in serious housing shortages. Most harmful, will be the inability to control our own water.

In addition, the onerous system of checkpoints, permits, and closures makes daily life extremely difficult and restricts access to major worship sites in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth. I come today to tell the story of my villagers and ask your help in getting the security barrier by Aboud moved to a different location. A security barrier already exists on the international recognized 1967 border. The additional security barrier will add more hardship to Aboud.

I also intend to explain how Aboud is a positive model for pluralism in the West Bank—a fragile model that will only survive if certain corrections are made.

We have been fortunate to have the support of many Christians in the United States. I would like to thank His Eminence Theodore Cardinal McCarrick, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the Honorable Henry J. Hyde for all their work to save and protect the Christian narrative in the Holy Land. Recently, Cardinal McCarrick and representatives of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops visited Aboud and brought it to the attention of the highest levels in the Bush Administration, the United States Congress and the press. The people of Aboud and I are grateful to all the churches and people across America who have supported our cause.

ABOUT ABOUD

Aboud is a small village nestled in olive groves northwest of Jerusalem and 4 miles east of the 1967 Green Line, the internationally recognized border between Israel and Palestine (UN Security Council Resolution 242). It is situated on a ridge and looks out over a valley toward Israel and the Mediterranean Sea. The population is approximately 2,200 residents of which almost half are Christian. Two settlements with a total population of around 6,500 are located northwest of Aboud. They are Beit Ayre and Ofarim, established in 1980 and 1982 respectively.

The Christian history of Aboud dates back to when Jesus and the Holy Family passed through Aboud enroute to Jerusalem from the Galilee. There are remains of seven ancient Christian churches dating back to the early centuries and visited yearly by pilgrims from all over the world. Local tradition holds that residents of Aboud received the Christian faith from Jesus himself. Christ is said to have preached in Aboud where the ruins of the Messiah church stand. Another example of Aboud's ancient Christian heritage is St. Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, named in honor of our village patron, Saint Barbara, was built by the Emperor Constantine and his mother, Helen. (This church was destroyed in 2001 for security reasons by an Israeli bomb.) Today, there are two churches in Aboud, including one Greek Orthodox and my Roman Catholic parish of Our Lady Mother of Sorrows.

A PEACEFUL VILLAGE

About is a small, peaceful village with good relations among Christians and Muslims and also with the Israelis living in the nearby settlements. I have worked with the Christian and Muslim residents of About to strengthen inter-faith relations. During the feasts of Christmas and Easter, the Muslims in About come to the multi-purpose room of our church to celebrate with us. Muslims also come to the ancient site of St. Barbara to celebrate her feast day. Likewise, Christians go to the hall in front of the Muslim community's mosque to celebrate both the end of the month-long Ramadan fast and Adha which takes place 70 days after Ramadan. People of the two faiths often travel together and are protective of each other at checkpoints. There is no extreme violence in our village, and if a conflict arises within the Christian community, or with anyone, the parish priest helps them work out the problem. No suicide bomber ever came from About.

When About's land was taken for the settlements of Beit Ayre and Ofarim, the decision was made to accept the situation. Lately, however, the situation is deteriorating because of the extreme security measures Israel has taken. While we remain friends with many Israelis, our primary problems come from the friction with Israeli government and military officials over the occupying authority's security measures. Unfortunately, settlers in other settlements farther away did burn and uproot 4,000 olive trees in December 2000, and previously uprooted 500 grape vines in October of 2005.

THE EFFECT OF THE SECURITY WALL ON ABOUT

All governments must provide security for their citizens, so I understand the need for Israel to provide security for their citizens. However, the security measures it has developed as an occupying authority in the West Bank have created difficulties and resentment among all Palestinians. The barrier is the latest extreme measure in a long list of measures implemented in the name of security. Please refer to the map in your packet. The barrier already exists as a high wire fence with a dirt road and security cameras along the 1967 border. The heavy blue and red lines on the map delineate where the barrier will be built near About. Our land for this barrier has already been taken and plowed under by the military. The Israeli military states that the blue line indicates state land and the red line indicates land owned by About. About disagrees with Israel's definition and characterization of the blue line. About appealed the placement of the barrier to the Israeli Supreme Court, but on May 16, 2006, the Supreme Court said the barrier should go ahead as shown on the map. I come before you today, on behalf of the people of About, and ask the help of the United States Congress and the Bush Administration to help us reroute the barrier before it is erected and worsens the situation on the ground as explained in the rest of my testimony.

Impact on the Economy

The preparation for the security barrier has already taken 36% of the Christian agricultural land (over 1000 acres) to protect and enlarge settlements. Even before the barrier has been erected, the loss of the land and olive trees has already badly damaged the people's livelihood. An ugly dusty swath winds its way through our olives groves and grazing fields. Seventy percent of our economy is agriculturally based and roughly one third of the land has been taken by the Israeli military for the barrier. Aboud is primarily a rural village whose economy is dependent on olive trees and grazing land for sheep and goats. The sheep and goats provide cheese, milk, wool, and meat. The shepherds cannot move their flocks where they need to go. This wall will block out large areas of grasslands in the face of farmers and shepherds. The olive trees are also an important part of Aboud's Christian heritage, some dating back a 1,000 years. Our farmers support their families by producing olives and olive oil. Residents have been compensated from between \$15-25 per tree. This is not adequate considering that one olive tree yields around \$200 of income per season. The economic impact on our village is tragic. Without access and control of our land we have no livelihood. Our villagers become more impoverished and this can only be a source of increased resentment. With sixty percent unemployment throughout the West Bank, there are very few opportunities for alternative jobs. The Israeli government has mentioned that gates will be put in the barrier for us to access our fields. However, these will be locked and controlled by the Israelis. They have the ability to close them whenever they wish, putting our crops and livestock at risk if they cannot be tended. Examples from other similar access gates in the West Bank indicate that access is sporadic and cannot be depended upon. I fear some of my parishioners will leave the Holy Land entirely if they cannot support their families.

Impact on the Water Supply

The residents of Aboud are very concerned about their long-term access to water. Since 1967 they have not been allowed to drill their own wells and the Israelis completely control the water supply. As you can see from the map, the water aquifer runs from north to south on the west (Israeli) side of the security barrier. This aquifer supplies water for Aboud, and of five nearby Israeli settlements. The Israelis have complete access and control of the western aquifer. They also have complete control of a small water reservoir on the east side of the wall between Aboud and the proposed barrier (see map). While this may appear to give control of the water to the residents of Aboud, it does not. The reservoir is surrounded with a high chain link fence topped with barbed wire. It is always locked and only Israeli officials and settlers have keys. It is not accessible to the people of the village. Once a month they come to maintain the pump. During the summer when water is scarce, Israel rations the water supply it controls for only a few hours a day for the residents of Aboud. However, the settlements get water 24 hours a day, seven days a week. During the rest of the year, the water pressure is erratic and undependable. This reservoir has to supply water to five communities. The long-term fear of Aboud residents is that Israel has the ability to shut down the water completely whenever it wants; and in the worst case, close down the Aboud reservoir and build another reservoir in the aquifer for the Israeli side only. With the barrier on the other side of the aquifer, the Aboud residents would not have access to any water. The residents of

Aboud, like other Palestinians, receive less than half the amount of water the World Health Organization suggests for a minimum. In addition, there is a huge disparity in consumption by Israeli settlers in the West Bank and Palestinians. Israeli settlers in the West Bank consume 3-4 times as much water than Palestinians.

Impact on Population Expansion

New construction for homes and businesses is limited to the Aboud city limits (see map). Housing for increased population in the north would have to be vertical. Permits would not be issued for the northern part of town because Israeli officials have restricted the height of buildings near the barrier. Thus, the barrier will affect the spread of construction despite the natural increase of population. As a result, a larger number of Aboud villagers will leave Aboud and leave the city. As a church we are doing all that we can to protect the existing Christians. However, they and the Muslim residents of Aboud are affected psychologically by the impending barrier. They feel trapped and that the future is closing down. Since 2001, 34 Christian families have left Aboud, and relocated to other places in Palestine to find better economic opportunities.

The Real Reason for the Barrier

As you can see from the map, the reason for the barrier is for the protection and expansion of the settlements of Beit Ayre and Ofarim and to control the water aquifer that supplies those two settlements and three others in the area.

Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem's Visit to Aboud regarding the Barrier

In December 2005, Michel Sabbah, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, planted an olive tree on the planned route of the barrier and told 1,000 peaceful protesters, "The wall doesn't benefit the security of either Israel or anybody else. Our prayers are for the removal of this physical wall currently under construction and the return of our lands. Our hearts are filled with love, and no hatred for anybody. With our faith and love, we demand the removal of this wall. We affirm that it is a mistake and an attack against our lands and our properties, and an attack against friendly relationships between the two people."

CHECKPOINTS AND PERMIT SYSTEM CREATES ADDITIONAL HARDSHIPS

The checkpoint, permit, closure, and Israeli-bypass road systems were created in the name of Israeli security. Unfortunately, these have created great hardships for traveling in the West Bank and especially into Jerusalem, the heart of the Christian narrative. Israel annexed East Jerusalem in 1967. The United States considers East Jerusalem to be Occupied Territory. The checkpoints on passable roads cause long lines, creating delays and sometimes denial of passage. Long waits up to several hours are not uncommon. Many roads are not accessible for my parishioners to exit from Aboud. If they take a back road to bypass a checkpoint, they risk being caught or even being shot by a settler. The villages have become like large prisons.

Lack of Access to Good Medical Care

Preferred medical care is in the larger towns of Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth. However, going to one of these hospitals is a major ordeal. Long lines at onerous checkpoints jeopardize a critically ill patient's life. Many times a permit is needed to get through a checkpoint or to go into East Jerusalem. There are many well known incidents of people dying from heart attacks and giving birth at the checkpoints.

Limited Educational Opportunities

Because East Jerusalem is annexed by Israel, the children of my parishioners cannot attend Christian schools there. They also do not have access to special-needs education.

Difficulty in Getting to Worship

One of the privileges of living in the Holy Land is worshipping at the most sacred places of the Christian narrative: The Church of Annunciation in Nazareth; The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem; the Palm Sunday and Good Friday (Via Dolorosa) processions and Holy Resurrections Service in Jerusalem. It is customary for people in the Holy Land to travel to the city where the actual event took place rather than attend their local parish. However access is limited to worship services in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth during Christmas, Easter and other holidays. Last Easter our church asked for permits to go to Palm Sunday and Holy Week. We asked for 300 permits for our parishioners and were granted only 100 (30% of what we asked). The situation was repeated at Christmas to go to Bethlehem via Jerusalem. This is a serious violation of religious freedom as I understand it.

Inability to Fulfill Mission Work

Our church has built an extensive network of development oriented institutions that help others, such as hospitals, clinics and schools. There is difficulty in staffing these institutions and getting supplies to them. The Christian mission in the Holy Land is being frustrated more and more.

Inability to see Family Members

Permits and checkpoints make family visits almost impossible. Families are often unable to get together without great hardship, hurting crucial family life.

Large Fines for Permit Violations

One-day-only permits are issued to Palestinians going into Israel, including occupied East Jerusalem. In other words, the traveler must complete travel in a twelve-hour cycle. Lack of a permit or an improper permit may result in going to prison from one to three months and paying a \$1,000 fine. Drivers' licenses can be suspended for three months. Even carrying a passenger without a permit will result in the three-month license suspension for the driver. The permit system is arbitrary and not useable at every checkpoint. Every soldier can do whatever he wants.

WHAT MY PARISHIONERS AND ALL THE CHRISTIANS NEED

1. Access to all their land
2. Access to Christian schools
3. Access to Christian hospitals
4. Access to Christian holy sites
5. Specifically for Aboud: Change the route of the security barrier so that our land and water can be under the control of its residents and the people it serves.

CONCLUSION: OUR PLIGHT AS A RELIGIOUS MINORITY. CAN PLURALISM SURVIVE IN ISRAEL AND PALESTINE?

I believe the answer is yes. The above testimony explains the plight my Christian parishioners are experiencing as a religious minority in the West Bank. I have limited most of the remarks to my personal experience in Aboud, but believe that most of our problems are shared by other Christians in the Holy Land.

Despite the difficulties, I believe that pluralism can survive in Israel and Palestine. The village of Aboud is a positive model of peaceful co-existence. As previously mentioned in my testimony, Christians and Muslims help celebrate a number of religious feasts throughout the year. They share problems. We share rides. Whoever is going out of the village, others ride with them. Relations with the nearby settlements of Beit Ayre and Ofarim are not violent. We have good Jewish people, good Muslims and good Christians. We can live together. However, this is only possible when each human being is accepting of the other without conditions. Then they can live in peace. If conditions are imposed and only one way is mandated, this is not the way of God. Each human must be treated fairly. The Israeli occupation must end. Violence and terrorism must stop. There must be no more settlements on Palestinian land. My prayer is that God will touch each heart to bring peace and justice and love to our Holy Land.

Thank you for your time and attention.

